

# **Refugees Assessed at the Health Department**

**By: Regina Crooks**

The Calhoun County Public Health Department (CCPHD) established a Refugee Assessment program in November 2008 through a contractual relationship with the State of Michigan. This program/contract allows refugees from all over the world to reside in Calhoun County after a physical assessment at the Health Department. Since the program began, all of the refugees seen at the CCPHD have been from Burma.

The benefit of the Refugee Assessment program is to make certain that the refugees who come into our county are in good health and are given the proper care. The health issues that have been identified include, but are not limited to: uncontrolled diabetes, Tuberculosis, hypertension, and vision and hearing issues. Identification and treatment of these conditions reduces the health impact in our community if these conditions had been left untreated or unidentified. Prior to the CCPHD Refugee Assessment program, refugees were coming to Calhoun County without any health assessment due to the lack of transportation to the Grand Rapids or Lansing assessment clinics.

The health assessment includes a physical exam, blood draw, vaccinations, and making referrals to health professionals. Complete blood studies are run on the refugees to identify any health condition they may have that is not visible during a physical exam. Another component added to the program in 2009 was staff assistance to clients in completing the necessary paperwork to obtain a "green card". This is an important step in helping the refugees obtain their citizenship.

Carolyn Wagner, R.N. and Cindy Parkinson, support staff are the driving force behind this program. Along with the CCPHD Medical Director, Dr. Gregory Harrington, we assess, treat, and refer all refugees who are in need of medical attention. The CCPHD contracts with several translators who are fluent in English to assist with the assessment of the refugees. Carolyn obtained her TB nursing certification in 2009 and was part of the very first class of Health Department nurses in Michigan to obtain this training. This has been instrumental in Carolyn understanding the complexities of TB and following the treatment regimen of the many refugees who are reactive to their TB tests.

In 2009, 114 refugees were assessed, 159 in 2010, and 160 already in 2011. As you can see, this program is growing every year. Lutheran Social Services is the main referral source for the refugees seen in our clinic. All refugees must have a sponsor in the area before they can be allowed into the state.

We find this population of new residents to be very hard working and strive to be productive members in the area. The Burmese community has created a community garden off Avenue A in Springfield. They plant a wide variety of vegetables that you may not be able to buy in the local grocery stores. The CCPHD has developed a very personal relationship with many of the refugees. Most of the refugees are in need of various items (e.g., toothbrushes, warm clothing, etc.). When such needs arise, the CCPHD staff step up and donate items or contact local church pastors to ask if they will provide any of the

necessary items or assist the refugees. Due to Carolyn's level of involvement with the Burmese population, she has been invited to many celebrations in the Burmese Community including attendance at weddings, graduations, funerals, and the annual Chin Festival.

Overall, the Refugee Assessment program plays a significant role in improving and protecting the health of Calhoun County citizens. The CCPHD feels very fortunate to have been selected to host this program.